

Cultural History and Cultural Theory

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From tradition to modernity

In the following, I will try to see how well this framework [the cultural theory developed by Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky]¹ can help us to understand the problems of transition from traditional to modern societies, which has been a central concern of modern social theory, from Comte to Marx, from Tönnies to Durkheim, from Weber to Parsons. Social change is the subject of chapter 4 of *Cultural Theory*, and the way it is presented can be summarized in a few basic ideas:

- There is not just one line of change - from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, from *solidarité organique* to *solidarité mécanique*, from traditional to modern - but a plurality of possibilities - twelve, to be precise, from each of the four cells of the group-grid table to each other;
- Macro changes tell us little about micro changes, while micro changes can help us to understand the direction and possibilities of macro transformations. To take the example presented in the text: in Margaret Thatcher's England, it was naive to assume that the dismantling the hierarchy of British society would lead to more individualism and enterprise, since it could also lead to equalitarianism and fatalism; and while some levels of fatalism are functional to individualism, excessive equalitarianism is threatening (p. 79). The same reasoning, and certainly more forcefully, can be applied to the attempts to move the Soviet Union into some kind of market society.
- Changes are never wholly from one quadrant of the table to another, no society has just one culture; they always have the four, in some combination, and some amount of change among them is an expected consequence of their dynamic equilibrium.

The implication is that the classic sociologists had a poor view of the possibilities of change (usually just one, instead of twelve!), which would explain the mistakes they did in predicting how the future would be like. We can grant without much difficulty the latter point. On hindsight, few of the classics, except perhaps

¹ Thompson M, Ellis R, and Wildavsky AB (1990) In *Cultural theory*. Vol. pp. Westview Press, Boulder, Colo.

Weber, had a good grasp of the events to come. But it would be too presumptuous to believe that they could only count up to two, instead of twelve.

I would like to suggest that the reason the classics never went too much beyond two types, and one line of evolution, is that they were not interested in developing a general theory of social change, but a theory of historical change in a given period, that is, the passage from traditional to modern, contemporary societies. To understand this, and to see if it makes sense, it would be necessary to see if there is such a thing as a "historical theory", how it would differ from the theories proposed in chapter 4 of *Cultural Theory*, and what are their advantages and disadvantages.

Theory and History

For Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky, history is indispensable, but is not theory. "Without theory, history cannot speak; without history, theory is dumb"; it is as impossible to predict historical events as to predict "how many leaves will blow off a tree in the next storm" (p. 272). They are, of course, in good company. Karl Popper, in *The Poverty of Historicism*, purported to strike a deadly blow to the pretenses of theoretical history. It is impossible, he says, to predict the course of human history, which is influenced by knowledge which still do not exist, and which cannot be anticipated (if they could, they would not be new); this means that "we must reject the possibility of a *theoretical history*; that is to say, of a historical social science that would correspond to *theoretical physics*. There can be no scientific theory of historical development serving as a basis for historical prediction"².

At this level of abstraction, the answer to Popper is that there are other ways of doing theory besides that of theoretical physics. More to the substance, we may argue that there is a fruitful space to be threaded between abstract, empirically empty theories and concrete, conceptually empty historical facts, and this is the soil where the classic sociologists attempted to walk. Let us see, in a nutshell, how Max Weber attempted to do this.

In his introduction to the English edition of *Economy and Society*, Guenther Roth wrote that "sociologists live, and suffer, from their dual task: to develop generalizations and to explain particular cases. This is the *raison d'être* of sociology as well as its inherent tension. It would be incompatible with the spirit of Weber's approach to value the trans historical ("functionalist") generalizations of any formal social theory more highly than the competent analysis of a major historical phenomenon with the help of a fitting typology"³. Weber well-known solution for this dilemma was the development of ideal types, a halfway breed between thick descriptions of reality and theoretical constructions.

Types of cultures: traditional China and Western Europe.

We can see Weber at work in two small pieces on capitalism in China and Europe, in a volume edited W. G. Runciman⁴. Chinese capitalism in the times of the Warring States was politically determined, a common

²Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, New York, Harper, 1964 (1957), p. VII. Since trees do not develop new knowledge, Popper would not object to an attempt to predict the number of leaves falling of a given tree in the next storm, or even the likelihood of that storm, and in this sense he would give more room to history than what Thompson et al. do.

³Guenther Roth, "Introduction" in Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Berkeley, 1968, vol. I, p. XXXVII.

⁴"Government, Kinship and Capitalism in China" and "The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in Europe", in W. G. Runciman,

feature of patrimonial states; it developed from money lending and contracting for the princes, and the monopoly in mining and trade. It lacked many features that would be central to Western capitalism: free market exchange, the depersonalized capitalist enterprise and the public trading companies, based on the collective credit worthiness of their owners. "On the basis of political accumulation of wealth, there developed a patriciate, however unstable, and a class of great landowners leasing out plots of land, which was neither feudal nor bourgeois in type but speculated in opportunities for purely political exploitation of office. As is typical in patrimonial states, therefore, the accumulation of wealth, specially of land, was dominated, not primarily by rational economic acquisition, but by trade" (p. 316).

This is essentially a negative description (what Chinese capitalism lacked, in contrast with the Western type) but it turns positive in Weber's analysis of the role of kinship in Chinese society. Kinship groups in China worked as a strong counterweight to patrimonial authority. Secret societies, villages and broader political communities were either organized along kinship groups or federations of extended families; individuals were completely immersed in their immediate kinship groups. The explanation given by Weber for this bond is a cultural one: it came from the cult of the ancestors: "in the historical period the absolutely fundamental belief of the Chinese people has always been the belief in the spirits of one's ancestors (...) and their role (...) as intermediaries for the wishes of their descendants with the spirit of Heaven, and the absolute necessity of appeasing them and gaining their favor by means of sacrifices" (p. 318).

The social consequences were that, first, patriarchal power was strengthened; and second, that the cohesiveness of the kinship group was strong enough to resist the encroachments of patrimonial power, in contrast for instance with Egypt, where the cult of the dead, but not of the ancestors, pervaded everything, and the dominance of patrimonial power was overwhelming. The kinship group owned communal land, provided loans and assumed responsibility for the economic needs of its members, took care of the infirm and the widows, and provided schools for the children. Authority within the kinship groups was a combination of hereditary charisma and limited democracy, with precedence of the elders and equal voting rights for married men. The importance of communal land and the economic and religious links everybody kept with their kinship group meant that life in cities and villages was always a foreign place for of its inhabitants . . .

The description of traditional Chinese institutions goes on, covering the role of villages, the temples, the feuds between kinship groups, the nobility, the literati, the emergence and decadence of a cast system, the organization of occupations. In the nineteenth century, many institutions which are typical of modern capitalism already existed in China, including the freedoms of movement, of professional work, of buying land, of money-lending and trading in goods. Weber concludes by saying that, "from the small capitalist beginnings which have been discussed, there might well have grown (again, the old question), taking purely economic considerations into account, a purely bourgeois industrial capitalism. We have already learned several of the reasons why this did not happen. Almost all of them brings us back to the structure of the state" (p. 300).

"Bourgeois, industrial capitalism" for Weber is much more than the simple accumulation of wealth or the pursuit of profit⁵. For him, it is just one instance (although the more influential one) of a broader process of rationalization, a phenomenon unique to the Western culture, which includes the empirical and rational sciences, rational jurisprudence, western music, architecture, the printed literature, and the rational, specialized official of western bureaucracies. Capitalism is the opposite of unbridled avarice and enrichment by loot and conquest.

Weber - *Selections in Translation*, Cambridge, 1978, 315-340.

⁵"The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in Europe", in Runciman, op. cit., 331-340.

These are irrational impulses, but capitalism "is the same as the pursuit of profit by means of continuing rational capitalistic enterprise: that is, for the constant *renewal* of profit, or '*profitability*.' (p.333). The profitability is assured by peaceful exchanges, the rational organization of free labor, the presence of capital calculations based on some form of economic accounting. All this, in turn, depends on much broader institutions, such as the existence of a "calculable legal system and administration in accordance with formal rules", an institution unique to the West. Elsewhere Weber would show how the "spirit" of capitalism was linked to the Protestant ethic, and, more broadly, with the Jewish-Christian tradition, and how it was associated with the rational-legal mode of political domination, typical of modern Western societies.

Conceptual translation

It would not be difficult to translate the two polar societies described by Weber into the grid-group framework. Traditional China was obviously a case of high grid, high group culture. Grid was provided by the patrimonial state, group by the kinship group. Kinship groups were in turn very stratified in their interior, with assigned places for elders, married men, single men, educated and non-educated, women and children. There was some place for outcasts, isolated people who would fall out of the kinship groups, and eventually get together in bandit groups roaming the countryside and attacking the rural properties; but not for individuals trying to strike on their own, without support of the kinship group or a place in the patrimonial bureaucracy. Western European societies, at the other extreme, were low grid, low group cultures. Feudalism had precluded the establishment of high grid, patrimonial structures of political dominance, with absolutism as a short-term interlude in a long tradition of political contracts and individual assertion; while Protestantism has revived the ancient spirit of individual prophetism and ascetism of biblical times, typical of a society used to the absence of a dominant state of its own. China, accordingly, was never able to develop capitalism in full form (although Taiwan may make us wonder) while Western Europe gave rise to rational capitalism and its related institutions.

Did we gain anything we did not have before by translating Weber's types into the grid-group framework? We did, in a sense, since we were able to compare the two societies in terms of the same vocabulary and according to a well defined set of propositions the interrelations between social structure and attitudes and values. But Weber's descriptions of China and Western capitalism are not just detailed accounts of historically irreducible realities. He uses concepts like patriarchy, patrimonialism, kinship groups, charisma, democracy, rationalization, which are general, in the sense that they can be applied to a broad range of societies and periods, and at the same time endowed with historical density, since they are derived from the study of concrete societies. Compared with the group-grid framework, Weber's typology is much less neat, and less systematic; at the same time, it leaves the reader with a much better sense of the societies he is writing about than what one could get from a historically disembodied interpretation along the group-grid vocabulary. This statement is impossible to prove, and can be just a manifestation of personal taste. A stronger case can be made for the notion that Weber's typologies show that it is possible to develop theory in a middle ground between purely historical descriptions and very general concepts.

The explanation of culture.

How good are Weber's and the grid-group approaches to explain culture, and to understand change? Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky talk about "cultural bias", defined as "shared values and beliefs", along five modalities: fatalism, hierarchy, individualism, egalitarianism, autonomy. Cultural biases are functionally linked to social structure, and no theory is presented about how social structures become the way they are. Weber also understand culture in terms of values and beliefs, and link them to a limited number of "world religions")) ancient Judaism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam. Historical religions are not completely

irreducible to each other, since they can be compared in terms of the role of prophetism, ascetism, the development of sect, the presence of magic, the existence of a sacerdotal structure, and so forth. In very broad terms, there seems to be a causal links between religion and social structure: Protestantism gives way to capitalism, Confucianism and the cult of the ancestors set limits to individualism and patrimonialism, the cult of the dead favors centralized, patrimonial bureaucracies.

On closer examination, however, the line of causality is less clear. Ascetism is typical of institutionalized sacerdotal castes, while magic and orgiastic practices are linked to popular religion; prophetism requires the absence of legitimate political domination. We can try to place several of Weber's religious practices in the grid-group frame:

Religious practices	<i>LOW GROUP</i>	<i>HIGH GROUP</i>
<i>HIGH GRID</i>	Religious hierarchies, intellectual religions	Ascetism, opposition to magic, intellectualism
<i>LOW GRID</i>	Salvation religions, inward and outward looking	Sects, orgiastic cults, prophetism

It is certainly possible to do better than that, but the exercise makes clear that, although useful, the analysis is made difficult by the absence of a crucial social dimension, the stratification system. It is not enough to say that stratification corresponds to grid; it is necessary to know one's position in the stratification ladder, as well what are the rules governing the movements among strata, along the status-class dimension.

We could conclude that Weber, as he breaks the world religions into their constitutive parts, comes closer to functional explanations of religious values and beliefs than it is usually thought. As he does it, his interpretations become more amenable to a systematic framework for comparative analysis, and in that sense gives support to conceptual approaches like stratification and grid-group theories.

The explanation of change

How did capitalism come about? Will China ever become capitalist? This is the problem of social modernization with which we started this text. As they gained strength in the 1950Ñ and 1960s, modernization theories assumed that contemporary, non-Western societies in Africa, Asia and Latin America were similar of Western European ones in the past, and would eventually catch up with the West through the spreading of modern values, attitudes and aspirations⁶. There is much less certainty about this today, and Weber would certainly not endorse this view. For him, the seeds of modern capitalism were not in any kind of traditional past, but on a very special kind of past)) the combination of feudalism and the Protestant ethics)) , which was unique to the Western past. It is possible to summarize Weber's theory of modernization in the table below⁷:

⁶The classic reference is Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society*, Glencoe, The Free Press, 1958.

⁷For a broader discussion, see S. Schwartzman, "Back to Weber: Corporatism and Patrimonialism in the Seventies," in James M. Malloy (ed.), *Authoritarianism and Corporatism in Latin America*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1976.

<i>Weber's theory of modernization</i>	Traditional societies	Modern societies
Weak states, individualist values (low grid, low group)	Western feudalism	Modern capitalism
Patrimonialist, collectivist past, hierarchical values (high group or low group, high grid)	China and other oriental patrimonial states	??

Modern societies are "modern", for Weber, because they are "rational", or more specifically, because they have developed a special kind of rationalization in the organization of the economy:

In all civilizations different areas of life have been rationalized in a great variety of ways. When it comes to distinguishing them for the purposes of cultural history, the essential question to ask is: which spheres of life were rationalized, and in what direction? Thus, the primary task is to recognize the special character of Western rationalism in general, and of modern Western rationalism in particular, and to explain its origins. In view of the fundamental importance of the economy, every such attempt at explanation must above all consider the economic determinants. But the causal relationship in the reverse directions should also not be disregarded. For the origins of economic rationalism depend, not only on rational technology and rational law, but also in general on the capacity and disposition which men have for certain kinds of practical rationality in the conduct of their lives. Where this was hindered by restraints of a spiritual kind, the development of an economically rational mode of life also encountered serious internal obstacles. Among the most important formative elements of the mode of life in the past, in all parts of the world, have been magic and religious forces and the concepts of ethical obligation that were anchored in the belief in such forces⁸.

We could not possibly examine here all the implications and the contemporary significance of this view. It anticipated the difficulty of most non-Western countries to develop their economies after the first years of post-war optimism, and in anticipated also, in a way, the failure of the Socialist countries in introducing modern economic rationalization through central planning and political fiat. Although he failed to predict the recent economic expansion of Japan and other Asian rapidly developing countries, a re-reading of *Economy and Society* would show that he did not ignore the peculiarity of Japan's feudal past, and its possible road in opening the role for the emergence of a local bourgeoisie⁹; and he placed the questions of social and economic rationality (the rationality of institutions and value systems, not just of individuals) at the center of modern social theory where they still remain.

⁸"The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in Europe", in Runciman, op.cit., p. 340.

⁹M. Weber, *Economy and Society*, (edited by G. Roth and C. Wittich), Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978, vol. II, p. 1102.

Conclusion

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that the grid-group theory can be very important to understand and clarify many of Max Weber's notions about different cultures and societies, and their possible transformations. A more detailed effort by someone more familiar with the framework could go much further than I did. Weber's theory of modernization is very pessimistic, too bound to the past, which is a good counterweight to the naïve optimism of two or three decades ago, but could lead to paralysis, and to the inability to see the possibilities for change. In the group-grid theory, however, culture biases are seen as strategies of different groups in society for fostering their life styles, and are more open to change and discontinuity.

This does not mean that Weber was just a precursor of the grid-group theorists. His kind of approach had the flesh of living history, and pointed to a limited number of very crucial problems and dilemmas of modern societies. His concepts were broad enough to guide him through the thick descriptions of old and modern societies, and not abstract to the point of losing their historical and descriptive connotations. No analytically defined set of concepts could replace and turn dispensable this kind of approach, of Weber and other classics of contemporary social sciences. They are the models to be followed.